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THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS

and

THE DEDICATION OF CHILDREN
TO THE MINISTRY

by

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE: *The two addresses here printed were delivered before the Student Body and Faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary in the Fall of 1946 by Rev. C. M. Richards, D. D., LL. D., formerly Professor of Bible in Davidson College. The first of them deals with a subject which has been too seldom presented to the members of our churches in recent years. The second treats of a matter which should also be of vital concern to Christian parents in a day when we are faced with an apparent under-supply of candidates for the ministry. They are made available through this bulletin in the hope that they may stimulate our church to a more careful study of the questions discussed and encourage our ministers to preach more frequently upon these themes.*

THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS

Rightly apprehended, infant baptism is one of the most sacred and significant of all the ordinances observed by Christians. In presenting their children for this sacrament, parents at once recognize a responsibility and claim a sacred privilege which can only be understood aright when seen in the full light of Gospel truth. It is appropriate, therefore, that we take the time to consider its significance anew and to recognize it as the priceless gift which it is.

In beginning our discussion it is appropriate for us to recognize that we have no "thus saith the Lord" for the baptism of infants but that our practice is based on inference drawn from the Scripture. The fact that the Master commissioned His apostles to go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; the fact that Peter, in his great Pentecostal sermon, called on men to be baptized and added, for the promise is to you and to your children; and the additional fact that, among those persons baptized by the apostles, at least three of them are spoken of as having been baptized with their households all point in the same direction. Almost certainly in some of these groups were included children, which fact would yield an inference that the infant children of believers have a right to baptism. But when we add to that the fact that the New Testament clearly recognized that the covenant with Abraham was identical with what we call the covenant of grace and that the infant child of Abraham received the seal of the covenant, then the inference that the children of believers should be baptized becomes so strong as to merit a place in that creedal statement of our Church. It is truly by good and necessary inference that we believe the children of believers should receive the sign and seal of the covenant.

Now in this sacrament there are three principal parts: The covenant itself, the sign and seal of the covenant, and faith—all of which originated in and are enveloped in and permeated by the condescending grace of God, and it is important for us to understand the relation of each of these parts to the other.

In the first place, the sign of the covenant, in the Old Testament circumcision or in the New Testament baptism, does not create the covenant but is a visible sign of the covenant already existent, just as the rainbow is a sensible sign of the covenant with Noah. It is also the seal of the covenant and answers the purpose of a seal. When the sacrament is administered properly according to the command of God on the one side and received by man on his side, it may be said that the covenant is made under the hand and seal of both contracting parties that it may be binding and sure.

The covenant when once established may encourage and confirm faith but the covenant does not create the faith. The covenant was made with Abraham as an award to the faith of God's servant. Faith is the antecedent occasional cause of the covenant. It was so in the case of Abraham and must continually be the antecedent occasional cause of this covenant whenever made between God and man.

These points will be freely admitted in the case of the baptism of adults but if so, on what ground do we administer the sacrament to the children of believers?

First, on the ground of God's command. He commanded Abraham to circumcize his children, which he proceeded to do, circumcizing Isaac when he was eight days of age, and Ishmael when he was thirteen years of age. And

second, on the ground of the faith of parents. In Abraham's case, Isaac, at eight days of age, was incapable of exercising faith and yet faith must be the antecedent to the covenant. On whose faith then could Isaac have been circumcized except on the faith of his father, Abraham?

Now what do we believe to be the effects of baptism, of this sacrament as administered to the children of believers? First of all is its effect on the parents. And among these may be mentioned that it should produce in parents a wondering sense of worship that God should have entered into a covenant of salvation with them—a covenant that includes their children. And a second effect should be that of driving parents to an earnest consideration of the reality of their faith—a faith that accepts the blessings of the covenant not only for themselves but for their children with them. And the third effect should be to produce in parents a confident assurance of the ultimate salvation of their baptized children.

Now what effect does the administering of the sign and seal of the covenant have upon the children themselves? It marks them as parties to the covenant as made between God and their parents as representing them. It marks them as members of the visible church which "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children." It does not make them members of the visible church—they are that by birth to their believing parents. It simply marks them as already members of the visible church. There is a rather close parallel between their relation to the visible church and the relation of a child of American parents to the American government. Such a child is by birth of American parents a citizen of America, but when his birth certificate is recorded, it stands there on the books of the government as a mark of his citizenship, entitling him to the protection and to the care of the government to the limits of its powers, withholding from him only the right of taking part in government by voting or holding office until he, having come to full understanding of what citizenship means, claims those privileges of citizenship for himself. And so in the case of the infant members of the visible church, when they are marked by the sign of that membership—baptism—they are entitled to the care and the nurture of the visible church, withholding from them only the right to vote in congregational meetings and taking part in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, until they have, in mature understanding, claimed those rights of church membership for themselves.

Then what is their relation to the invisible church which consists "of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, and shall be gathered into one under Christ the Head thereof?" As to their relation to the invisible church, there have been and are some varied views. One view is that administration of baptism by a proper official regenerates the child and so makes him a member of the invisible church. This, of course, is baptismal regeneration. There is a second view just the opposite to the one named—that baptism is only a sort of pious dedication of the child to God, much as any other possession might be dedicated. The third is that baptism admits to membership in the visible church without any consideration of the invisible church at all. And the fourth is that baptism marks a child as a member of the visible church with a hope that he will become or be made a member of the invisible church.

John Calvin's view was that baptism marked the child as already a member of the invisible church by its regeneration from birth.

There are several points to be noted in connection with John Calvin's belief, that the infants of believing parents are regenerated from birth. First of all he does not obscure the fact that the child is by nature a sinner, born under original sin, and that is clear from the fact that he uses the word "regeneration," indicating that there was something in the natural birth which made it necessary for the child to receive a new birth—regeneration. Then as to the regeneration of the infant from birth, none of us would be disposed to deny the possibility of such a wonderful occurrence, because we believe in a God with whom all things are possible. Moreover it seems to be quite evident from the experience of many Christians that, without any change such as is marked by regeneration and conversion, observable to onlookers or consciously to themselves, they have from earliest childhood seemed to love the Lord, to trust in Him, and to obey Him, which they would not have done had they not been regenerated at birth. And moreover we must believe in regeneration from birth if we are to believe in the salvation of all infants dying in infancy—a belief which Calvinists have usually held, though in some cases perhaps with doubt and with equivocal statements of that belief.

It is to be noted that Calvin, by regeneration, meant something more than just the beginning of a new spiritual life. With him it included remission of sins, adoption, and even sanctification, while most of the reformed theologians from his time on have confined regeneration to the beginning of a new life. But unquestionably Calvin's comprehensive use of the term includes the beginning of the new life. Now Calvin's views generally were accepted by the reformers of his day and those who succeeded him, and, in substance, were written into the creeds of all the churches that belong to what was called the Reformed Group. The Westminster Assembly in all of its creedal statements magnified the blessings and the effectiveness of the covenant and made, in the Larger Catechism, the definite statement that baptism was appointed by Christ "to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life." And nowhere does our creed make the least distinction in significance between the baptism of adults and the baptism of infants. From the time of the Westminster Assembly there seems to have been a decline in appreciation of the significance of the baptism of infants, leading to its omission by very many parents. In America this decline in appreciation of baptism was greatly accelerated in the times of the Great Awakening and the great revival, by the new emphasis that was put on the experience of conversion—conscious conversion—the more violent the better. In our own Church theologians such as Thornwell, Dabney, and Palmer, seem to have fallen in, to an extent, with this lack of appreciation of the sacrament of baptism as administered to infants, for while claiming to hold fast to the effectiveness of The Covenant, Dr. Thornwell, among them, speaks of the infants of believers who have received the sign and seal of the covenant as "heirs apparent of the Kingdom." Now an heir apparent may or may not attain the throne and if such children are only heirs apparent of the kingdom, they may or may not attain to that kingdom. The theology at Princeton, as represented by the Hodges, seems to be more definite in its appreciation of the significance of the baptism of infant children of believers. Dr. Charles Hodge said that they are baptized not because they are already regenerated but because of the fact that they are of the body of the elect. This and the statement of Calvin are not contradictory. Calvin says they are regenerated from birth, which could have been only if they were of the elect, and Hodge says

that because they are elect they are certain of regeneration, leaving the way open for the work of regeneration and of conversion to take place at some later time, as in most cases it seems evidently to do.

The reformed doctrine then evidently is that the child of believing parents that receives the sign and seal of the covenant is certain of everlasting life.

And now I would like to mention some reasons that make one feel sure that this belief of the Reformed Churches is right. And the first of them is in the quest of believing parents for that which is good for their children. They are not seeking simply that their children may be counted members of the visible church with whatever good that accrues from that, but they are seeking the eternal salvation of their children, and to give them anything less than that, even membership in the visible church, would seem much like giving them a stone when they ask for bread, and that is not like God. And again the spiritual blessing of children of the covenant, which means salvation, must be true from what we know of God's special interests in men. It is in their spiritual life rather than in their physical and temporal life—a fact that is evident throughout His dealings with His people, especially from Mt. Sinai, when God established a theocracy. The very nature of the theocracy and the fact that God was at its head indicates that it was a spiritual kingdom in which God promised to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Later in the time of Judges, the theory of the kingdom was lost sight of and God, to help them realize that the theocracy was really a kingdom with himself on the throne—a centralized authority—permitted them to have a line of kings; Saul, David, and their successors. Presently again when the attention of the people was so fixed on this temporal kingdom as to expect that it would endure forever with the descendants of David on its throne, God was teaching them still the true nature of the kingdom by dividing the kingdom and then destroying both parts of it, so that, having no temporal kingdom before their eyes, they might after waiting several hundred years be more ready to understand the nature of the kingdom that God was seeking and to recognize the true King, in the person of Jesus Christ, who constantly said that His kingdom was not of this world. Beyond this—lest the people should still cling to the thought of the temporal kingdom—this king, who came to them, was put to death, and then their capitol city itself was utterly destroyed, leaving to the children of men the hope—and only the hope—of a spiritual kingdom with the risen Lord on the throne with a capitol city, the new Jerusalem, the builder and maker of which is God. If God's interest in men in larger groups is so preeminently spiritual, must it not be true that His interest in individuals is preeminently for their spiritual well-being rather than for their physical or their temporal? Moreover, the very wording of the covenant seems to support the belief of the Reformed Churches in the spiritual salvation of those who receive the sign and seal of the covenant, for He said to Abraham "I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed forever." He is to be their God and surely that means that He is to be their God wherever and whenever they may need Him. Now Isaac, who received the seal of the covenant in his early infancy lived for a period of life—a long period as men count age—but Isaac has been dead some thirty-six hundred years. Now what Isaac needed and still needs is not a God who would be with him during his lifetime on earth but in the period after what we call death—in eternity. Once again the position of the Reformed Churches seems to be confirmed by baptism in its symbolic

significance. In New Testament usage it seems very clearly to symbolize the work of the Holy Spirit, which is a cleansing work; and surely this cleansing must begin with the pollution of sin with which the child begins its earthly life as well as from practical sin in its later life. And once again the position of the Reformed Churches is confirmed by the vows that parents take when the sign and seal of the covenant is administered to their children, one of the questions addressed to them being: "Do you recognize that your child is by nature sinful, having need of the redeeming power of the blood of Christ and the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit, and do you receive and rest upon Jesus Christ alone for the salvation of your child with the same faith with which you receive and rest upon Him alone for your personal salvation?"

Now the position of the Reformed Churches is not that all children of believing parents who are baptized are saved. Neither is it true of the Reformed Churches that they believe that all adults baptized are saved. If these adults—some of them who have been baptized—are not saved, the failure traces back to the faith of the professed believer. There was no real faith and so there could be no real covenant. Faith always being the antecedent occasional cause of the covenant. And so if there be some of the baptized children of believing parents who are not saved, the failure must again be traced back to the imperfect faith of the parents, which must always be sound and true if it is to be the antecedent and occasional cause of the covenant.

And so is brought back home to the hearts of parents who are professedly Christians that if the baptism of their infants is to insure their salvation under the covenant, then the faith of those parents must be a true and living faith. To a parent or parents having true faith in Jesus Christ and His blessed covenant for them and their children, when they present their children in baptism, I think that they may hear the Savior say: "According to your faith be it unto you", and then must we humbly cry: "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief."



THE DEDICATION OF CHILDREN TO THE MINISTRY

—I SAMUEL 1:28.

*Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord;
as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord.*

These words are those of Hannah with reference to Samuel, the son she had obtained by asking of the Lord.

They are chosen for the text in this service because of the bearing they are conceived to have on the matter of a ministerial supply—a matter of constant and vital importance.

God is sovereign and He calls whom He will to the ministry and when and where and how.

In most cases there is, perhaps, no preceding circumstance or event on which attention can be fixed so that one may say, with confidence: because of this circumstance this man was called to the ministry. But in the case of Samuel one assuredly may say that because of his mother's having dedicated him to such work, he was called to be a Prophet and a Priest.

It is set forth here, that similar faith and devotion on the part of mothers will still be honored of God by calling sons dedicated by them, to be Ministers or Missionaries. Now, it is the practice of Christian parents to dedicate their children to God in the sacrament of Baptism, and it is their duty as well as privilege to do so. But it is something more than this general dedication that I am proposing and urging. It is the special dedication of a child or children, one at a time, to God's service in the Ministry. One of my friends, now passed into glory, had an only son who he hoped would be called to the Ministry. The son grew up to be a useful man, but the father, while proud of his boy, still disappointed that he had not become a minister, said to his wife: "Perhaps it is because we did not specifically and specially dedicate him to that high office in the service of God."

How may this proposed dedication of a son to the Ministry or of a daughter to Mission service be made?

In answer to that question it must be said, there is no one prescribed but many different ways in which it may be done.

Let me recite to you several different ways in which it has been done, and the results. . . . Several years ago a young man appeared before the Presbytery of which I am a member, asking ordination to the Ministry. In the course of the examination he told the Presbytery that his mother had dedicated him to the Ministry at his birth, but that he had known nothing of it until he had finished his training and volunteered for service in a foreign field.

This dedication, made by a faithful mother, was a secret between God and herself, and God honored it.

The dedication may not be made in the infancy of the dedicated one.

The first General Assembly of our church that I attended was the occasion of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Westminster Assembly. Many of the, then living, great men of our church were present to make

addresses. Dr. R. L. Dabney, Dr. Moses Hoge, Dr. Witherspoon, Dr. Mallard, and others. On the Sunday of the Assembly Dr. Hoge preached in the Second Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, of which Dr. John W. Stagg was then pastor. Two features of that service made profound impressions on me. First, Dr. Hoge's preaching, as nearly ideal as one should ever hope to hear, and next, his reply to Dr. Stagg's words of introduction. He said that in his church in Richmond there lived and died a Godly woman in whose Bible there was found, after her death, a deed of her son, John, to God for his service in the Ministry; a deed in rather formal language and laid up in her Book of God. Now here was that boy John Stagg, accepted as a gift from his mother and made the Pastor of a great church. The impression received was that John Stagg was of some age at the time the deed was written, and, not a very good prospect for the high calling to which his mother dedicated him.

Will you suffer a word as to personal experience?

My father was a Minister and my mother, according to all who knew her, his full-worthy help-meet. They had six sons who lived to be grown. They were all dedicated to God by Baptism in infancy. For some reason they specifically dedicated one of them, neither the first nor the last born, to the Ministry, and my mother asked the minister who baptized that one to pray God to accept him for that service. Knowing my father and mother, I am sure that nothing would have so delighted them as to have all of their sons enter the Ministry, but, while all of them became good men, four of them Ruling Elders, only that one specially dedicated to that service, ever felt that he was called of God to the Ministry.*

Perhaps it is best, as the first mother mentioned, to say nothing to the child of his dedication, but it is to be noted that this was not what Hannah did. She, at a very early time in Samuel's life, made him a member of the Priest's household and used, each year, to bring him a little priestly robe, the badge of that high office. So evidently he was made aware of his dedication.

In my own case, I always knew of my dedication and knew that my parents would be disappointed and that their dedicatory act would suffer violation if I did not enter the Ministry. So my mind was kept open to hear and respond to the will of God when He graciously led me to the settled conviction that He called me to this service.

Now, in what spirit should the dedication be made?

First, in the spirit of humble faith that God will accept the gift of the child for the service to which he is dedicated. Hannah's faith was clear and strong. Second, in the spirit of willingness to have the child used of God in any sphere of service that might seem good to Him. It would be one thing to dedicate a son to the ministry, knowing that he would be pastor of some great church and hailed for greatness all over the church. It would be quite another thing if he were to be an obscure mission worker in some remote, little-accounted field, or in deepest Africa, or the slums of Japan, or China. We cannot in our dedicatory act dictate to God the place in which the child shall serve.

* In this connection it is appropriate to record the fact that in the entering class of Columbia Seminary this year are six men who in their infancy were dedicated to the ministry by their parents.

Two Christian mothers were discussing the future of their children. The first said she would like her sons to be Ministers, but she was not willing for any of them to be Foreign Missionaries. The other thoughtfully replied: "Perhaps God will not call any of them to be ministers until you are willing for all of them to be missionaries." Later the first mother was heard to say that she had become willing for her children to be missionaries, and not long after that, her three sons, in order of age, heard and answered calls to the Ministry, and are now useful men in that high calling.

Some sons dedicated to the Ministry do not live to enter that service, on earth, but are taken away by what we call death, but parents, in dedicating them can do so in willingness to that also, knowing there is another than this earthly sphere of service, whereof it is said that in it "His servants shall serve Him."

Let us see some of the inducements for parents to dedicate children to the service of God in the Ministry.

It is a way that one may show appropriate gratitude to God for the gift of His Son to die for us.

Sir Harry Lauder lost two sons in the First World War, and all during that war he gave himself up to entertaining soldiers. At the end of the conflict his strength was so depleted that physicians advised him to take a long rest. He went to far away Australia, where he was accustomed to taking long walks, sometimes in company, sometimes alone. One afternoon he was walking with a little child. As they passed some houses they noted flags in the windows. He explained to the child that these meant that sons had gone from these homes to the War, and returned in safety. Then they noted a gold star in a window, and he explained that this meant that a son had gone to war from that home, and had died for his country. Presently, as they continued their walk, they noted a golden star shining in the early evening sky, and the child asked: "Did God send His son to the war?" "Yes" replied Mr. Lauder, "He sent His son to the greatest war there ever was, and His son died." These are days when gold stars are treasured in many homes of our land. How deeply we feel for the parents who gave their sons to die to preserve and continue our liberty! How should we feel about God's gold star—His gift of His Son to die for us? How could a mother better show her loving gratitude than by giving Him a son of her love to serve Him in the Ministry?

"God never allows Himself to become any man's debtor." Frequently when His servant has done that which pleases Him, He returns to that servant something for which his heart longs but for which he has not dared to ask. Hannah gave to Him her only son—the only child, probably, that she hoped ever to have, and God returned her gift by bestowing upon her what would be the greatest good a Jewish woman of her day could desire—five other children.

When a mother dedicates a son to the Ministry, she dedicates him to a life of association with great books; to close association with the chief of all good books, the Bible. She also dedicates him to association with good men; to close association with Jesus, the greatest gentleman that ever walked this earth. Such association inevitably cultivates in him a manner of life and character to delight his mother's heart. One who has opportunity to note candidates for the Ministry through college, seminary, and into pastoral service, often wonders at the graces of person and conduct that have been wrought in them by the grace of God through their associations.

Any mother would feel pride in the fact that her son was appointed or elected to take part in the government of our country. A son dedicated and called to the Ministry has part in the government of the Church of God—a greater honor than a post in any earthly government. As leader of a session, member of Presbytery, of Synod, and, occasionally, of the General Assembly, a minister has honor, which, whether he appreciates it or not, rejoices the heart of his mother.

Again, any mother would rejoice if her son were appointed ambassador of our great country to any kingdom of this world. How much greater honor and joy come to her when he is called to be ambassador of the Court of Heaven to the whole world of men!

The Ministry is still the most honored of all callings, and a good pastor is the best loved man in his community. Perhaps the best reward that comes, in this life, to a mother whose son is dedicated and called to be a minister of the Gospel, is the knowledge that her son is loved and trusted of his fellow men.

And these things are not all.

When the Emperor Charles the Fifth had a medal struck in honor of his reign, he had placed on one face of it two hemispheres, to show that he had possessions in both. On the other face, the Pillars of Hercules, till then thought of as the end of the world towards the west, and under these Pillars the Latin words “plus ultra”—“more beyond.”

Whatever rewards may come in this life to one who has served God, he or she may always know that there is more beyond.

It is written: “They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and as the stars forever.” If her son be one of these wise ones, then the light that shines on him shall surely rest on the mother that bore and dedicated him.

The mother of Dr. John Leighton Wilson, the great missionary to Africa and servant of the Church at home, dedicated him to the Ministry from his birth. Dr. Wilson has been estimated to have led fifty thousand souls to Christ.

We have a popular conception that for each soul led into the Kingdom, a servant has a star in his crown of Glory. If there is something answering to that, and when Dr. Wilson appeared before the Master a crown with fifty thousand stars was given to him, do you know what I think he did with it? I think that, turning to his mother, who surely was at his side, he first placed the crown upon her brow, and then, together, they cast the crown at the feet of their common Savior and Lord.

That will be glory to them!

